Les Rêves des Rêveurs

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Les Rêves des Rêveurs

by Shachaai

Summary

The circus arrives without warning. No announcements precede it; it is simply there, when yesterday it was not.

On the surface, *Le Cirque des Rêves* is a wonder and a delight to all who enter through its gates. Its allure is undeniable: a mysterious travelling circus, a self-contained world open only at night, constructed entirely in black and white and full of spectacles and tents that defy reality and stretch the very limits of imagination.
But behind the scenes, two young magicians, Will, the enchanter's tempestuous son, and Hannibal, the sorcerer's vicious apprentice, find themselves locked in a deadly magical contest against one another at the behest of their teachers. Much to their dismay, as, as their ardour and fascination for each other grows, the circus that is their lives, their battleground and the testament to their feelings for one another begins to fall apart. And everything else with it.

Notes

If you missed it in the tags, this is an AU based upon *The Night Circus*, by Erin Morgenstern. Only with a lot more sex and death, because, naturally, this is Hannibal. Additional inspiration comes from the storynexus game of the same name that was originally commissioned to promote the novel.

Warning (for this chapter and the future): This is not a story about child abuse, but this story features implicit - with a few brief explicit - instances of children being abused by their parental/guardian figures and generally being treated as intelligent objects rather than people, which will be occasionally referenced later on in the story as well. This abuse takes many forms, ranging from negligence/abandonment and emotional distance, to social isolation, verbal abuse, deliberate malnourishment, and physical abuse as a form of 'training'.

See the end of the work for more notes

Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic. Worlds had to be in travail, that the meanest flower might blow...

- Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

LONDON, OCTOBER 1904

In the centre of the ring, the illusionist looks like something out of a dream. Their off-white top hat is tipped rakishly on their head as they turn for the audience, brown curls dark beneath, and their dress is a cloud of white, of silver, of pearlescent grey. Despite being indoors, the air around them is full of falling snowflakes, and, when the illusionist opens their clasped hands, a raven bursts forth, satin-black as the midnight gloves that had apparently encased it.

The bird caws as it circles the tent over the audience's heads, and when the people gathered below it glance up, the illusionist themselves rises in the air to meet their eyes. There are gasps from the audience, but the illusionist only smiles at everyone, extending one hand as they stand on nothing but air, calling back the bird.

Seeing the hand, the raven finishes one last circle of the tent's interior and dives, slams itself against the illusionist's chest - and disappears in a blizzard, the cloud of the illusionist's dress exploding out into a torrent of air that rushes around the tent, snowflakes and black feathers and smiling, storm-blue eyes at the heart. Shapes move through the wind, faster and faster, snow and birds and butterflies, the fleet movements of deer moving through dappled woods in winter, rushing on before the howl of a storm.

The wind drops suddenly to an eerie, frozen still. The images vanish with it, leaving the air full of unnaturally motionless snowflakes, ice-cold and glittering. When the audience reaches out to touch the icy crystals, wondering, the flakes melt against the heat of warm bare hands, but when the illusionist lifts one finger and lets the snowflakes fall at last, floating serenely to the ground just as they do themselves, no dampness touches the clothes of those watching in awe, and no droplets of melting ice stain the tent-floor.

When all the snowflakes have fallen, the illusionist removes their hat, and bows.

They vanish as they turn on their heel, melting away into nothing like the wind and snow. All that is left behind them in the tent is the empty ring, and the sound of the audience's fervent, rapturous applause.

PARIS, FEBRUARY 1873

The man who styles himself Auberon the Enchanter, one of the greatest and most renowned stage-magicians of the modern era, is accustomed to receiving both letters and gifts from an adoring public. He is familiar with theatre managers falling all over themselves in his presence - Auberon is a solid investment infamous for giving sell-out performances -, and it is a common enough occurrence that some theatre managers become a little overwhelmed at the sheer volume of correspondence that Auberon receives from his fans - that said theatre managers will, of course, find themselves handling at least in some small part for the duration of Auberon's performances at their premises.

Auberon has never had all three situations combine into something quite so bizarre as they do the night he is left a child and a suicide note in the manager's office.

The manager himself, all wringing hands and useless hovering, had guided Auberon to his office as soon as the curtains had fallen on the magician's evening show. A lawyer had come by whilst Auberon had been on-stage, apparently, a child's limp hand in his grasp. Pushed the little one on the manager with instructions they were to be given into the care of Auberon and then left, refusing all the manager's demands for an explanation, all the manager's protestations that this was a *theatre,* not a schoolroom or nursery; did he look like a mother, a governess, a nurse?

To the unimpressed Auberon, the theatre manager looks like little more than a worm twisting on a hook, ready to be cast into the water for hungry fish to swallow. His babbling is giving the magician a headache, stress pounding a sharp beat in Auberon's temples and making itself firmly at home there the moment he pushes open the theatre office's door and sees the child sitting inside the room.

The small, quite young child sitting inside the room, whom, with their hat removed and left to drip melting snowflakes on the office desk beside what looks like a cup of cold, overly milky tea, undoubtedly has the same dark, glossy head of brown curls that Auberon does.

"Ah, *fuck,* " says Auberon.

The theatre manager makes himself scarce.

In a way, Auberon must consider himself lucky that the child sitting before him is old enough to have been breeched before being dumped at the theatre, because, other than the quick glimpse of trousers visible beneath their winter coat, the child - *boy* - seems sexless. He is small enough, young enough, that, whilst sitting, his booted feet do not touch the puddle of melted snow they have left around themselves on the floor, and, with his father's curls tumbling to his shoulders, his skin pale as porcelain, he could be a doll rather than a living boy. God. He's pretty enough for it, boy *or* girl.

Dressed-up like a doll too, clothes wet but of a high quality, tailored to their wearer's slight frame. Boot-leather still shiny and laces knotted in carefully-even bows. A toy carefully sacrificed at the temple for one's coming of age.

There is a sad envelope pinned to a button on the boy's coat. Auberon crosses the office in two quick strides to snatch it up, paying little mind to the way the child it had been attached to shies away from him in startlement.

Whilst the writing on the envelope uses Auberon's stage name, addressed to the very theater he now stands in, its contents greet him with his given name, Henri Graham.

There are two letters inside, of very different temperaments.

The first is the more passionate in nature, the last emotional appeal of a woman whose words in death utterly fail to move Henri in much the same way as they had during her brief lifetime. The only knowledge worth gleaning from them is that the child in front of Henri really *is* his son, born of a long-ago affair in New Orleans, and that the boy, now placed into his custody, is called William.

The second letter is from the lawyer of the dead woman's family. French gentility. They will have nothing to do with the boy, the illegitimate offspring of the wayward daughter they now only bury to save face in society, and so they have placed the boy in the care of the one who sired him in accordance with the will of his mother. They have outfitted the child with clothes suitable for a Parisian winter and seen him to his father, and thus have concluded all their duties towards him. Neither Henri nor the child are to contact them again.

"William," Henri Graham says, testing out the sound of the name, and looks over the top of the letters at his son.

Aside from the hair, Henri hardly sees much of himself in the boy. The child's delicate features and fair complexion come entirely from his mother's genteel stock, and the wild, sea-storm colour of his wide eyes as he looks up at Henri is *entirely* his mother's gift to him, a great deal of what had led Henri to seduce the woman in the first place.

As is the way those stormy eyes narrow at Henri.

"William," Henri says again, and sets the letters down on the desk beside his son's abandoned hat and teacup. The label of an unwanted nuisance. "A fine name."

"Will, " says the boy, implacable as the winter.

Henri ignores the correction, as he has no plans that involve needing to remember it. “Would you like to go and live with your mother’s family?”

The boy’s eyes narrow further, sharp, hurt little things now - a sign that, perhaps, he does have more than his curls from his father after all. His mother had always been more easily fooled. “They already said that they do not want me.”

Of course they wouldn't. They’re cold fish, and *William* is the bastard child of the daughter they’d disowned, born on another continent away from a *proper* French upbringing. And there is no hiding the child’s swampy roots; though the boy’s English is carefully enunciated, the Cajun accent still rounds his words. He is a born and bred créole, and the very thought of him must horrify his Parisian grandparents.

So they had pushed him onto Henri, putting their absolute faith in the old adage: out of sight, out of mind.

“I could make it so that they want you,” Henri says. It wouldn’t even take that much effort, and Henri could be child-free again in time for his next performance. “You’d be rich.”

“Would they go crazy too?” asks the boy, and his voice, that should be sweet with youth, instead carries a stubborn, troublesome note of accusatory belligerence.

Henri looks down at him more closely, at his son’s face upturned to his, and finally notes that what he had mistaken entirely for hurt in the boy’s gaze is instead something closer to *angry* hurt, spite, those narrowed eyes fiercely meeting his own gone grey, blue-grey, like flecks of unfriendly ice.

The boy passionately dislikes him.

Henri’s lips peel back from his teeth in a smile that has no kindness in it, outraged at being challenged by the petulant *chit* he had been *trying* to indulge. “They do say madness is something that runs in families.”

The boy jerks away from him, and, untouched, the teacup on the desk beside them abruptly shatters with an ugly *crack* . The china disintegrates into jagged pieces on its saucer, and cold tea sloshes everywhere, into the saucer, over the desk, a few rivulets reaching the edge and dripping sadly onto the floor.

Henri’s smile vanishes. He looks at the mess with a frown - and, just like that, the tea begins picking itself up from the floor, droplet by droplet. The rivulets reverse themselves on the desk, running backwards and leaving no mark on the polished wood behind them, streaming back into the teacup whose shattered pieces are picking themselves up and delicately fitting themselves back together, cracks vanishing and patterns reforming until the teacup sits whole upon the desk once more, the liquid inside of it sending up delicate wisps of steam into the air.

The boy stares at the teacup, his eyes wide.

Henri Graham kneels, carefully avoiding the puddle of melted snow on the floor, and takes his son's chin in his gloved hand, firmly turning the boy's head and those lovely, stormy eyes of his back to meet his father's. His mother's eyes.

His father's mind behind them.

The child's expression is a wonder, a conflict of warring emotions, and Henri carefully scrutinises and catalogues each of them before he releases Will's face, no mind paid to the possessive red imprints left by his fingers on his son's cheeks and throat.

"It may be worth my while keeping you around after all," says Henri.

The boy does not answer him, and, from then on, refuses to make eye contact with Henri at all.

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Several months later, when Henri deems his son ready, the magician composes a letter of his own. He writes only a name on the envelope, no address, but posts it all the same, secure in his confidence that the letter will find its way across the distance to its intended recipient nonetheless.

Naturally, it does.

LONDON, OCTOBER 1873

The woman sits alone. Her seat - and the space in the otherwise empty stage-right theatre box around her - is a coveted one; the rest of the theatre is packed full of people, the tickets for

the final performance of Auberon the Enchanter's brief return to the London stage having sold out weeks earlier, despite their exorbitant price.

A significant number of the audience caught-up in the crush of humanity think to look at the woman enviously - imagine having the wealth and prestige to obtain a whole box for oneself! -, but soon find their attention drawn elsewhere, to the stage, to the people around them, forgetting about the strange woman almost the moment she leaves their line of sight. A few, taking judgemental note of the woman's obviously foreign features, her oriental eyes and the dark black sheen of her hair, linger a little longer on her visage. Those who think more spiteful thoughts about whose bed she has had to lie in to have had the box either given to or bought for her, even as they forget about the woman like the better, kinder people they sit amongst, tend to meet some minor misfortune or other at some point later in the evening. A drink spilt there, ruining a favoured gown. A pocket-watch lost. A stubbed toe. A hand or cape or curls caught up accidentally in a carriage door.

In some ways, it is a shame the woman does not gain more attention: it is quite likely that, had anyone been giving her more than a passing glance, the woman would be described as beautiful. Her features are austere but not unapproachable, and her modestly flattering gown of pale blue *faille française* and white satin is neither outdated nor cutting-edge couture. A triple-stringed necklace of white gold and tiny seed pearls elegantly drapes her throat and collarbones, and an artful arrangement of white hydrangea flowers spills down the back of her upswept hair - the blooms either false, exquisite ornaments, or somehow still perfectly fresh after being worn in the heat of the theatre for a few hours. It is impossible to tell which.

In another way, perhaps it is better that the woman is so easily dismissable, lest her behaviour prompt outrage from Auberon the Enchanter's more adoring admirers, for at no point during the magician's performance does she applaud. Not when Auberon transforms all the fluttering fans of the overheated ladies in the hall into doves that form a great flock over the audience's heads, doing a single swooping loop of the room before they return and drop down as fans again onto their astonished owner's laps. Not when Auberon transforms his tailcoat into a cloud of black butterflies and back again, nor when the magician requisitions a young lady from the audience and leads her in a waltz around the stage so dreamy that, after three paces, the couple are dancing on the air.

The woman with the box to herself does not clap even once, or react in any way save to rise silently from her seat at the end of the performance amidst the thunderous applause, donning the dolman she had worn that evening to ward off the autumn chill and making her way backstage. No-one marks her departure, and stagehands and the other people working backstage thoughtlessly step aside from her path without seeming to be aware of doing so, without noticing the woman passing by them at all.

She knocks politely on a door at the end of one particular hallway, and it swings open immediately of its own accord, admitting her to the casual chaos within.

Henri Graham has always existed within his own very specific kind of mess. His dressing room is a good example of that, full of clothes and papers and empty birdcages cast carelessly everywhere. Two overstuffed trunks have exploded themselves in one corner, and the room's chairs have been eaten by papers, shirts and a discarded tailcoat. A top hat hangs rather

precariously from a mirror's edge, overseeing tins and cases of greasepaint and powder, sticky brushes and stained rags. An empty absinthe bottle props up a stack of books using feathers for bookmarks on the dressing-table, an unused tea-set - half inside an empty hatbox - seems to be being used as a home for a jumble of cufflinks, neckties and their stickpins, and in-between it all lies gloves and calling-cards, coins and crumbs. A vase of roses. The odd hair-ribbon. A lost button.

Henri, tailcoat already removed from his performance and busy wiping away the thick layers of his stage makeup at his dressing-table, meets the woman's eyes in his mirror and grins. For a moment, with the glare of the overhead lights in his eyes and traces of white powder still on his cheeks, he looks very much like a leering corpse.

"Murasaki!"

The woman only dips her head in greeting as she comes inside, quietly closing the door behind her.

"That bad, huh?" Henri laughs and turns to look at her properly, discarding his used handkerchief on the table behind him with no care as to where it lands, another mess on top of the pile. "I knew you'd hate it, and your *face* during the show only proved I was right."

"It is good to see you too, Henri," says the woman, gracefully acquiescing and taking a seat when Henri waves a hand towards a particularly ugly velvet armchair set in one corner of the room and summons it closer, the shirts and tailcoat tossed atop its cushions flying away to hang themselves in the nearby wardrobe.

Henri waits until she is settled before asking, "Can I get you something to drink?" Before thinking, and adding on a slightly chagrined note, "I'm afraid there's no tea."

"No, thank you," says the woman, smoothing out the lines of her skirt over her lap, hands still covered in their kidskin gloves. Pearl buttons shine up her wrists. "Was it your shamelessness that you thought I would not approve of, or your charging the public admission to witness it?"

"*'Shamelessness,'* " Henri echoes dryly, and then lets loose a bark of laughter as he approaches her. "It could be argued that I was doing the general public a *favour.* Not a single person in that audience tonight believed what I was doing was real, you know that? The *magicians* they are more accustomed to lining up in their droves to see use machines and contraptions to perform even the most mundane of their tricks, and yet I give them *real* magic."

"Your argument is that they knowingly pay to be fooled. By giving them something real, you do not, then, give them what they paid for."

"Ah, but I *am* fooling them by doing so, don't you see?" Henri says. "The legerdemain that they really don't see coming. They are fooled by believing that what is true is really false, rather than hoping that something false might be true. The audience cannot tell the difference between what I do and what the others do, beyond knowing that *I* do it better."

“And yet still - it is shameless.”

Henri shrugs, inspired to youthful vigour, and lets the criticism roll off him like water off a duck’s back. “Who needs shame when displaying the lack of it pays so well? And it *does* pay well.” He begins digging through one of the mounds of assorted items nearest to him on a table, carelessly sending a pile of papers - letters, playbills, cards and scribbled notes - sliding in a waterfall to the floor. They slip underfoot, like a carpet of mudstained snow. “Are you sure I can’t get you something to drink?”

“Quite sure,” says the woman, and leans forward in her seat until Henri stops his digging and looks up at her again. “You were lacking in precision tonight.”

“Can’t be too good if I want them to believe I’m as fake as the rest,” Henri says dismissively, and pulls out a bottom of whisky that had been somewhere near the bottom of his mound of things. Fortunately - if only for his company -, the bottle is empty, and Henri puts it aside again with a look of mild disgust. “I thank you for coming and suffering through my show, despite its shamelessness. I was beginning to think that you weren’t coming at all; I’ve had that box reserved for you all week.”

“I had no reason to decline your invitation.”

“Meaning you would have declined it if you’d had?” Forgetting about his drink, Henri grins at the look on the woman’s face, a barely-there twitch around her shapely mouth. “Murasaki, you wound me.”

With indifference, perhaps. “Your letter said you had a proposition for me.”

Henri’s grin grows, a flash of teeth showing in his smile that makes him look both dangerous and charming. Younger than the streaks of silver in his grey hair might suggest, the wrinkles his powder smoothes away. “I was wondering if you might fancy a game, since it has been far too long since we last played.”

For the first time all evening, one of the delicate white hydrangeas in the woman’s hair shifts, a flower sliding ever-so-slightly out of its place when the woman tilts her head curiously.

“Have you not given up on teaching?”

“I *had,* but a singular opportunity arose that I simply could not resist.” Henri wanders over to a door in the dressing room that has almost been hidden by the shadows of the room and the placement of both a long standing mirror and a hatstand before it, turning the knob and sticking his head inside. “Will, dear,” he calls, before returning to the woman’s side and leaning almost smugly against the table.

A silent minute goes by, and then a small, thin boy appears in the open doorway, a pretty little thing dressed too finely, too neatly, for the shabby mess that surrounds him, surely *barely* of age to have been made to wear trousers. He has the soft brown curls of any little girl’s most favoured doll, and his eyes, quick and bright, flick first to Henri and then to the woman, before worriedly darting back to Henri again.

He hesitates, weight shifting on his toes like he is prepared to run.

“It’s alright, Will,” says Henri, before the boy can dart back into the room from whence he came. “This lady is an old associate of mine; there’s no need to be shy.”

Henri beckons the child to him, and, when the boy tentatively approaches, reels him in close against his leg and holds him there with a firm grip on his shoulder.

To the woman, Henri says, “This is my son, Will.” His grip tightens, pushing Will forward a little when the boy tries to hide by positioning himself behind his father’s thigh. “Will, this is Lady Murasaki.”

“Oh,” says Will, a soft little breath outwards he hardly seems aware he’s made. Then, barely any louder as he glances up at his father’s guest from beneath the fall of his fringe, *“Enchanté de faire votre connaissance.”*

“Pareillement,” the woman returns, and notes the way Will’s gaze seems *just* shy of meeting her own, as though he is looking at her ear rather than her eyes.

“English,” Henri injects sharply, and Will’s gaze drops from the woman entirely, Will shrinking back as far as Henri’s hold on him will allow.

Seemingly satisfied by this show of biddability, Henri dips into the pocket of his waistcoat with his free hand and produces a silver pocket watch, placing it on the table beside them (and sending even more papers fluttering down to join the carpet of their kin on the floor).

“Will, I would like you to show the lady what you can do.”

Will frowns and lifts his head. “You made me promise not to do that in front of anyone.”

“This lady is not just anyone.”

“But -” Will falters when he sees the look on his father’s face, and whatever he had planned to say clearly goes under a quick revision, “like in my lessons?”

Henri nods, and releases his grip on his son.

The tension goes out of Will’s shoulders at once, and he takes a step away from his father. And then another, circling around the table and setting his eyes on the pocket watch upon it. And then another step, and the pocket watch follows him, turning slowly in its spot, the silver fob chain attached to it slithering along the wood like a shining snake.

When Will stops, the watch rises into the air, spinning like a flipped coin, once, twice, chain jangling - before hanging in place, still.

Henri looks over to the woman for a response.

“Impressive,” she says, and sees a sweet small smile bloom on Will’s lips out of the corner of her eye, like the first snowdrops of spring, “but quite basic.”

With the dreadful *crack*-tinkle of shattering glass and wounded metal, the pocket watch explodes. Glass shards, cogs and gears fly everywhere, and the body of the watch and its chain drop to land on the tabletop with a heavy slither-*thud,* the cracked face of the watch lying separate, forlorn on the ground .

"Will," Henri snaps, and the insulted scowl on the boy's face slides into mild panic.

Will's mumbled apology is unintelligible, but the pieces of the broken watch slowly gather themselves up again, cogs and gears slotting themselves back into place inside the mechanism, tiny hands re-attaching themselves to a face whose crack disappears as it floats back to its snug home in the body of the watch. In moments, the watch is complete again, slowly rising once more up into the air, ticking away as though nothing had happened to it.

"That is somewhat more impressive," the woman concedes, before looking back to Henri, warning, "He has a temper."

"He's young," says Henri, reaching out to pluck his pocket watch from the air and tuck it safely away in his waistcoat once more. "This is with not even a year of study; by the time he's grown he will be incomparable."

The woman shakes her head. "I could take any child off the street and teach them as much. Incomparable is a matter of your personal opinion, and easily disproved."

Henri smiles again with teeth. "Then you are willing to play."

"I could be convinced. Possibly. If it were more complex than last time."

"You think I'd wager *that* kind of natural talent for anything simple?" Henri tips his head towards Will, who, for lack of adult attention and for fear of departing without dismissal, has decided to crouch down and slowly begin picking up the papers strewn across the floor, stacking them once more on the table.

The table is taller than he is.

The woman watches him for a few moments, this young Canute trying to command the tides of his father's chaos. "Natural talent is a questionable phenomenon. Inclination perhaps, but innate ability is extremely rare."

Henri scoffs at her. "He's my own child; of *course* he has innate ability."

"And yet you admit he has had lessons."

"Will," asks Henri, without looking away from his guest, "when did you start your lessons?"

"March," says Will from the floor.

"What year?"

"This year," says Will, with the weary tone of one who feels they have been asked a particularly stupid question.

Henri's smile holds a vicious triumph, and he leans back against the table again - adding to his son's self-appointed task by sending more papers flying. "Eight months of lessons, Murasaki, and he's not even six yet. If I recall correctly, you occasionally start your own students a bit younger than that, without similar results. Will is clearly more advanced than he would be if he did not have natural ability. He could levitate that watch on his first try."

The woman hums a single flat note, before turning her attention back to the little boy on the floor - who freezes when he feels her gaze upon him, head lifted and a bundle of papers still clutched in his arms. A young rabbit that has just sensed danger but is not sure from which direction it is coming yet.

"Did you mean to break the watch?"

Slowly, keeping his eyes locked on her chin, Will shakes his head.

The woman nods - he had confirmed what she already knew -, and goes back to his father. "He has remarkable control for one so young, but such a temper is always an unfortunate variable. It can lead to impulsive behaviour, as some of your own mishaps should remind you."

"A mishap or two can be educational." Henri shrugs. "As for his temper, he'll either grow out of it, or learn to control it alongside his other talents. It's a minor issue."

The woman looks at him, hard. At the lovely little boy, shifting papers on the ground, who looks back up at her - and who frowns, annoyed, confused and intrigued when she speaks to his father and he cannot understand her words, the air around his ears turning thick and viscous and slurring her speech into indecipherable sound.

"Henri, he is *five.* You would wager your own child?"

"He won't lose," says Henri - and when Will realises his father's speech is just as unintelligible as the woman's, his face darkens like a petulant stormcloud. "I suggest you find a student you can tolerate parting with, if you do not already have one spare."

"His mother has no opinion on the matter?"

"The dead have no opinions worth hearing."

The woman sighs, and reaches up to adjust the shifted hydrangea in her hair so that it will not slip out entirely. "I understand your confidence in his ability, but I feel I must ask you to at least consider the possibility that your son could be lost, should the competition not play out in his favour. I will find a player to truly challenge him, otherwise there would be no reason for me to agree to participate in this game. His victory cannot be guaranteed."

"That is a risk I am willing to take," says Henri, without even glancing at his son. "If you would like to make it official here and now, go right ahead."

The woman sighs again, but nods, and when she looks at Will, the boy understands the words of the adults once more. "Very well. Master Will, would you come here please?"

Will, still frowning, looks to his father for guidance and, receiving Henri's nod, obliges the woman's request. He carelessly drops all of the papers that had been in his arms with all the pettiness of the childish and insulted and rises to his feet to approach her chair.

"You made me hear funny."

"I do apologise," the woman tells him, and dips her head courteously. "Although necessary, it was still quite rude of me."

When she raises her head again, Will is looking at her. Directly. No longer letting his eyes drift to her ear, his gaze meets hers with a precociousness almost alarming in one so young.

Will's eyes are the soft grey-blue of a raincloud, and, as they look at her, they slowly well up with water. "...You're sad," he says, and his lower lip wobbles like the emotion was born of his own heart. "I forgive you. Don't be sad."

"I-" the woman starts - before she catches herself, and breaks eye-contact with Will to glance at his father.

Henri looks deeply uninterested with affairs so far, waving two fingers lazily: *do hurry up.*

"...Thank you," the woman says eventually, and tries to offer Will a handkerchief - to no avail, as the boy is already scrubbing at his eyes with one sleeve. "Have you always been able to do things like what your father now teaches you in your lessons?"

"Always," Will confirms, and lowers his arm from his face. Both his sleeve and his skin have suffered from such rough contact with each other, fabric and cheeks salt-sticky, eyes still red. More quietly, he adds, "My *maman* said I was the devil's child."

"When you look like such an angel?" The woman reaches out at last, and gently brushes away a dark strand of hair clinging to Will's temple. His forehead feels hot, even through her glove. "I doubt it. Those curls of yours will break a thousands hearts when you are older."

Will smiles again, small and tremulous. "You're very pretty too," he says, and returns the woman's favour by reaching out to cautiously touch the soft, white fluffy feathers lining the edges of her quilted dolman. "I like your mantle."

The compliment is a charming novelty, and the woman feels her mouth slowly creep into a smile. Precious few people have the gifts or the astuteness to notice, never mind comment on, the woman in their presence, nevermind the clothes she is wearing. "Then perhaps when you are older, we shall have to see about getting you something similar."

"Could I?" Will asks, expression turning wistful.

The woman doesn't answer him, occupied in undoing the tiny buttons up her right wrist so she can pull off her glove. "Hold out your right hand please."

Withdrawing his fingers from her dolman's feathers, Will does so, his palm uplifted.

To his confusion, nothing is placed in his open palm. Instead, the woman turns his hand over, removing a silver ring from the littlest finger of her right hand and sliding it onto the ring finger of Will's right, her other hand holding Will's wrist in a tight grip.

Sized for an adult woman, the ring is far too big for the fingers of a five year-old boy. At least, until it starts shrinking down to fit him.

Softened by their earlier exchange, Will seems happy at the thought of receiving a gift, but his smile quickly fades when the ring, now fitting him perfectly, keeps shrinking, the silver glowing hot and beginning to squeeze around the skin and bone of his finger. He cries out in pain as the metal bites into him, burning him, and tries to jerk away, but the woman keeps a firm grip on his wrist, not allowing him to shake either the ring or her off.

"Stop it!" Will cries, and throws all his insignificant weight against the woman's hand, trying to pull away from her and the ring glowing bright and digging deep into his flesh. His gaze flies wildly to his unmoving father, tears streaking down his face. "Daddy, it hurts - *Daddy!"*

The ring thins and slips into Will's skin, sharper than the keenest of knives. It is a wound without blood, but it leaves a bright red scar around the boy's finger.

The woman releases him, and Will stumbles back a step or two away from her, still shuddering with shock and fright. His wide, wounded and wet-eyed stare looks dumbly between his newly-scarred hand and his father, searching for some sort of explanation.

"Good," says Henri.

Will crumples with one single, sad, inarticulate little sob, and takes the excuse of the messy papers on the floor again to go and hide under the table.

The woman sighs, and re-dons her glove, extending her upraised hand to Henri so he may fasten up its pearl buttons for her. "I will require some time to prepare a player of my own."

"Take all the time you need." Henri's fingers do not linger overlong near her pulse, already slipping a gold ring from one of his own fingers to place it on the arm of the woman's chair. "For when you find yours."

"You do not wish to perform the honours yourself?"

"I trust you."

The woman nods, and produces a handkerchief to scoop up the ring without touching it, folding the jewellery away within the fabric and making the whole disappear on her person again. "I do hope you are not doing this because my player won the last challenge."

"Of course not," Henri scoffs, ever vainglorious. "I'm doing this because I have a player that can beat anyone you choose to put up against him, and because times have changed enough to make it interesting. Besides, I believe the overall record leans in my favour."

The woman does not argue with his latter point, though the way her gaze pointedly drops to the table Will is still hiding under - from which the sound of someone carefully *not* crying

faintly, but tellingly, emerges - has something to say about the former.

“Have you a venue in mind already?”

“I thought it might be more fun to leave a bit of leeway as far as venue is concerned,” says Henri, studiously airy as his guest rises to her feet. “An element of surprise, if you will. I am acquainted with a particular member of the *nouveau riche* back in America who has a desperate desire to have his family name acquainted with something wild and unusual, and possesses all the connections and resources to make it happen. A nudge here, a suggestion there, and we should have something to work with.”

“His name?”

“Verger. Molson Verger. Makes his money running an ever-growing farming and meat-packing empire. He’s a bit of a boor, but in the way that’s easy enough to bend to our purposes. Wealthy, eccentric. There’s hope in his children; they both seem to be bright things, more forward-thinking than their father.”

A stack of papers on the dressing table shifts itself smartly to one side, leaving behind a single business card that sails across the room into Henri’s hand. He extends it to the woman.

“He throws wonderful parties. His bribe to society.”

She takes the card, and tucks it away beneath her dolman without looking at it. “I have not heard of him. And I am not fond of public settings for such matters.”

“Ah, but the public setting is half the fun! It brings in so many restrictions, so many challenging parameters to work around.”

The woman considers this, and their conversation that evening, before giving a slow, thoughtful nod. “Shall we have a disclosure clause? It would be fair, given my awareness of your choice of player.”

“Let’s have no clauses at all beyond the basic rules of interference and see what happens,” Henri says. “I want to push boundaries with this one. No time limits, either. I’ll even give you first move.”

“Very well, we have an agreement.” The woman offers Henri one last brief, polite dip of her head, adjusting the lie of her mantle over her shoulders. “I shall be in touch.”

She turns for the door, and then pauses again, chin tipped towards Will’s place of refuge under the table, ink-stained papers no doubt pressing into his knees.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Master Will.”

Will does not reply to her, nor does he emerge from underneath the table. The woman can still see his right hand from her vantage point, however, and the raw red mark remaining upon it even after the pain from the ring will have faded.

His silence is more honest a dismissal than his words might be now, so the woman takes it, nodding once more to Henri before she slips out of the dressing room and the theatre, her blue dress blending into grey in the night outside and rendering her just another faceless figure in the busy London streets.

End Notes

You have no idea how close I was to naming this chapter *The Last Will and Testament*. It got dumped because it only partially covered the events of this chapter, and then, not even all that well, but it was almost - *almost* - worth it for the terrible pun all the same.

A great deal of this first chapter is based heavily on the first two chapters of the novel, and a very significant portion of the dialogue of the second scene has been lifted directly from the book because it's so integral to the plot/the awful nature of the two magicians and their wager. We'll voyage into more original waters as the story progresses, I promise, so I hope there will still be some surprises for those of you who are familiar with the novel.

Murasaki's evening dress is inspired by no one gown in particular, but an amalgamation of what women would have been wearing in 1873/74. You can see some examples here, here, here, here, and here. Her dolman is based upon this one at the Met, because I adore the militaristic braiding and feathery edging. Like Will, I'm very weak to the soft and fluffy. Hydrangeas have many different meanings across cultures. In Japanese floriography, they symbolise heartfelt emotion. Western Victorians, in contrast, saw hydrangeas as negative symbols which one would give to their enemies/people they disliked, the flowers representing heartlessness, bragging, frigidity and rejecting a romantic suit. According to medieval belief, a young woman who picks a hydrangea flower will never find a husband. White hydrangeas in particular symbolise purity, innocence and abundance. *Or* bragging about one's wealth. They're a very complicated flower.

Next up, another strange boy meets an equally strange woman, Aukštaitija, January 1874, and Will's childhood continues to be awful.

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